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THE KILLER TOY

by Bounpheng Sisawath [Lao National UXO Project]

In June 2004, in the village of Nongsoung of the Paksong district in Champassak province, Lao People's Democratic Republic, 30-year-old Pheng and four of her five children went out to plant vegetables. At noontime, while she was cooking lunch for the children, three of them began playing with something she could not see. Shortly thereafter, villagers two kilometres (one mile) away heard the sound of an explosion coming from the direction of Pheng's garden.

Pheng lay on the ground unconscious, barely alive, covered with blood while her two-and-a-half year old son, Norm, sat nearby and played alone. He did not understand what had happened to his mother, sister and two older brothers. His sister, San, 11, and his two older brothers, Nya and Nga, 7 and 4, lay motionless. Norm was lucky because his mother's body acted as a shield, protecting him from the bomb fragments. When Pheng regained consciousness, she saw her children on the ground covered with blood, but her injuries prevented her from moving. Three of her children died in the incident before help arrived because the "killer toy" with which they were playing—a BLU-26 bomblet or "bombie"¹—exploded.

The villagers arrived to help Pheng and her children about half an hour after hearing the explosion. She was taken to the hospital where she stayed for four days. She suffered injuries all over her body, including a broken right leg, and was riddled with bomb fragments lodged in her head, legs and arms. Pheng was not poor, but she had to sell her land and animals to pay her debts to neighbors who lent her money for her hospital bills. Though she stayed in the hospital for only four days, she was unable to move easily for three months following the accident.

Lao PDR has over 80 million such bomblets scattered all over 15 provinces. These bomblets are remnants of the second Indochina conflict between 1964 and 1973, known in America as



Two-and-a-half-year-old Norm, who was shielded from the bombie by his mother, lost his three older siblings to the "killer toy."
PHOTO COURTESY OF BOUNPHENG SISAWATH

the Vietnam War. Thirty years after the conflict ended, these bombies and other explosive remnants of war continue to maim, kill and destroy lives and properties as well as serve as a hindrance to the country's socioeconomic development.

The Lao National UXO Project (UXO LAO) is the national humanitarian unexploded-ordnance-clearance organisation. It operates in nine of the most impacted provinces, clearing land for agriculture and other development activities as well as educating people to reduce the number of accidents from UXO. Since it was founded in 1996, over 7,200 hectares (28 square miles) of land have been cleared, benefiting more than five million people; unfortunately, accidents still happen. Despite the presence of community-awareness teams in each province, the work of such teams is not enough to remind and educate people of the dangers of UXO. A team is only able to visit four to six villages each month and every village once every three or four years due to resource constraints and the number of villages affected. The daunting task of clearing the more than 82,000 square kilometres (31,660 square miles)—more than one-third of the country's area—considered at risk from UXO will remain a challenge for future generations. ♦

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Bounpheng Sisawath currently works as a Technical Working Group Community Awareness Officer in Lao PDR. From 1996 to August 2006 he worked in various positions at UXO LAO Vientiane such as Chief of the Community Awareness Instruction, Database Technician and Chief of the Community Awareness Unit and Chief of the Public Information Unit. He studied at the Mining Institute in Moscow from 1987 to 1993, where he received a Master of Science in survey.

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